

Department of Defense Bloggers Roundtable With Major General Russell Handy, Commander, 9th Air and Space Expeditionary Task Force-Iraq; Director, Air Component Coordination Element-Iraq Via Teleconference
Subject: Air Force Training of Iraqi Air Force; Ongoing Training During Transfer to Office of Security Cooperation-Iraq Time: 9:59 a.m. EST Date: Monday, November 7, 2011

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PETTY OFFICER WILLIAM SELBY (Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): I'd like to welcome you all to the Department of Defense's Bloggers Roundtable for Monday, November 7th, 2011. My name is Petty Officer William Selby with the Office of the Secretary of Defense Public Affairs, and I will be moderating the call today.

Today we are honored to have as our guest Major General Russell Handy, commander, 9th Air and Space Expeditionary Task Force-Iraq and director, Air Component Coordination Element-Iraq, who will discuss the contributions and legacy of the USAF in training the Iraq -- Iraqi Air Force and ongoing air defense training as that mission is transferred to OSC-I and the Iraqis. A note to our bloggers on the line: Please remember to clearly state your name and blogger organization in advance of your question. Respect the general's time and keep your questions succinct and to the point. And we ask, if you are not asking a question, please place your phone on mute.

Sir, with that, the floor is yours for your opening statement.

MAJOR GENERAL RUSSELL HANDY: Thank you, Petty Officer Selby. I do appreciate it.

And I thank you all for your time tonight and your willingness to listen. I'm pleased to be able to talk about our successes in this operation, our legacy as we enter the final days of Operation New Dawn, and our airmen -- mostly, for me -- and their tremendous contributions here in Iraq.

As Petty Officer Selby said, my name is Russ Handy. I'm the commander of the 9th Air and Space Expeditionary Task Force-Iraq; also, the director of the Air Component Coordination Element-Iraq. And as such, I'm both the senior airman on the U.S. Forces-Iraq staff for General

Austin and also the commander of all air forces, U.S. air forces, in the IJOA, as we finish New Dawn.

It is a very busy, dynamic time here in Iraq, as we reposture and redeploy a sizeable force and associated equipment from the country's transition bases to GOI, assist our Iraqi partners and our colleagues comprising U.S. Mission-Iraq, as we all prepare together for life after USF-I and the next chapter of what should be an enduring strategic partnership with Iraq.

Since the president's comments last month highlighting our current path to compliance with the security agreement to have all of our military forces out by December 31st, we've really seen a renewed interest in these efforts from the States. And I'm proud to be able to talk about where we are in that process with you today. The president's remarks, though, only punctuated what we are already doing, was already under way, and that is our obligation to living up to our commitment of complying with the security agreement.

From an airman's perspective, this stage of the operation takes on a particularly unique importance and represents unique challenges. Some of our tasks remain constant. We're clearly still performing all of those air component missions you've become accustomed to hearing of: intelligence; surveillance; reconnaissance and close-air support, to keep overwatch and protect our forces; air mobility, to include air lifts and air refueling; search and rescue and personnel recovery; and operating and securing airfields, to name a few.

What is evolving here is how our airmen continue to do all this while they transition bases back to the authority and control of GOI, and assist U.S. Mission-Iraq in their efforts. And we do continue to do this in a dangerous place. We are, regrettably, reminded here on a regular basis there are still those out there who would seek to do us harm and would seek to do our Iraqi partners harm.

Our plans for what we're doing now, how we've postured our force in this phase, have really been in the works for the better part of a year now. This has taken a tremendous amount of collective effort from our entire joint team to be ready for this, and there is still much to be done. But I will tell you, we are ready; it's under way. And one thing you can be sure of: Our airmen will be here, overhead, keeping watch, protecting our forces until the last convoy, the last soldier, sailor, airman, Marine, Coast Guardsman or civilian departs the country from USF-I.

Now I'd be happy to take your questions.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Thank you very much, sir.

Somebody else joined while you were in your opening statement. Who is that?

Q: It's Sharon Weinberger.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Thanks, Sharon.

Q: Thank you.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: And Chuck, you were first on the line. You can go ahead with your questions.

Q: Yes. General, Chuck Simmins from America's North Shore Journal. Thank you for taking our call today. Are you able to provide us any numbers on the Iraqi Air Force -- number of personnel or number of aircraft?

GEN. HANDY: You bet. And there's really -- there's really two components of the Iraqi military -- Iraqi security forces, that as airmen we have been advising steadily for a number of years. And it's the Iraqi Air Force, that flies fundamentally fixed-wing aircraft; and then there's the Iraqi Army Aviation Command, and it's a separate service, separate from the air force and separate from the Iraqi army. There are about 5,000 airmen in the Iraqi Air Force, and I think the number is about 77 aircraft now -- roughly 75 to 80 aircraft. And there's about 2,500 in the Iraqi Army Aviation Command, and a little over 90 helicopters. So, together, the Iraqi air force and the Iraqi army aviation command comprise the air components, if you will, of the Iraqi security forces.

Q: Yeah, just a real quick follow-up. Does Ministry of the Interior, the police, do they have aircraft?

GEN. HANDY: You know, that's -- I do not believe the ministry of interior have -- I had to think about that for a moment -- I do not believe they have any aircraft, to my knowledge, because I am aware of support efforts that the Iraqi air force and the Iraqi army aviation command have done and do routinely with the Ministry of Interior. There may be some sort of support aircraft that I don't know about -- and I'm sorry I'm not sure of that -- but from the perspective of the -- of any sort of operational aircraft and support, that comes from the air force or the army aviation command.

Q: Thank you, sir.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: And Maggy (sp), you're next.

Q: Hi. General, I had a question briefly about the -- teaching the Iraqi air force the analysis of alternatives. I've heard they've had some problems with that. How's that process going?

GEN. HANDY: I'm sorry, Maggy (sp), the first part of your question was cut out. Could you say that again, please?

Q: I heard there were some problems teaching the Iraqi air force how to work with -- (inaudible) -- analysis of alternatives. Can you please tell me how the progress is going on that?

GEN. HANDY: Yeah, I'm sorry. It is a little bit of a bad connection. You said teaching the Iraqi air force something about alternatives?

Q: Analysis of alternatives when it comes to purchasing new aircraft and, you know, shopping around everywhere for the best -- yeah.

GEN. HANDY: OK. I've got it. Well, you know, really, where the Iraqi government purchases equipment is really an Iraqi government decision, and that's ultimately going to be up to their process, you know, and their democratically elected governments to decide. We provide advice. We think it's sound advice. We -- the advice we typically provide includes a think-about (ph) when you buy a weapons system, that you -- that you need to think about the maintenance and logistics and infrastructure and the training associated with that. And our Foreign Military Sales programs would typically include that; in other words, we would encourage if you buy an F-16, like the Iraqis have committed to purchase -- purchasing 18 F-16s, included in that is a training package and the like.

And so, again, I won't speak to what is better for them. That's really an Iraqi government decision. But our advice does typically include that you think about all components of that. There's more to an aircraft than just the aircraft itself, if that makes sense.

Q: OK.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: And Michelle (sp).

Q: (Inaudible) -- I think I'll pass just for the next round here.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Roger that.

Jeff.

Q: Hi, General. Geoff Ziezulewicz over at Stars and Stripes. Kind of a two-part question: Will there be any kind of U.S. Air Force trainers or presence on the ground post-December 31st? And are there any plans or mechanisms in place for if Iraq's airspace was violated after the withdrawal? There's been numerous reports that, you know, the Iraqi air force and the aviation command aren't really ready to, you know, secure the borders with airborne ISR or protect against any kind of intrusion into their airspace. So have any, you know, agreements or plans been whipped up, you know, on the U.S. part for that contingency?

GEN. HANDY: Jeff, as far as U.S. Air Force trainers, the short answer would be no, not the way you envision trainers today and the types of activities we've been doing with our trainers, our Title 10 U.S. military forces, if you will, conducting training.

Now, there will likely be a small number of U.S. military personnel working under an Office of Security Cooperation and under the U.S. Mission-Iraq. And again, I say "likely" because the final

arrangements are still being discussed. But those folks are going to be doing administrative management of Foreign Military Sales cases and Iraqi -- or the International Military Education and Training Program and the like. And they'll have some contractors working with them, security assistance teams. For example, the Iraqis bought a long-range radar system, and there will be contractors that are standing that up and training their controllers on how to operate it; but really, a very small number of military doing management of these cases, so not training as the way you think of it now. And part two of the question, again, short answer would be no. I know of no sort of discussion or arrangements about U.S. help. The security agreement is the obligation that we intend to live up to, which means military forces out of the country by 31 December. And that would include any military forces flying into the country. So we have no authorities or arrangements to be able to defend the skies.

Now, I will tell you that the Iraqis are producing capability to contribute to the ability to maintain sovereignty of their airspace. And I'm open to specific questions on this later. It's kind of a long story. But if you think about sovereignty, it's not just fighter aircraft intercepting interlopers, but the entire continuum. It starts with a watch, warn, and then it evolves into a response, and then the last thing on that continuum is the defense piece.

That watch, warn piece Iraqis are developing, the Iraq Civil Aviation Authority. Their civilian airspace controllers have control of a hundred percent of their airspace now, so they are monitoring aircraft entering the country, ensuring they're on flight plans and notifying the appropriate authorities if they're not.

The Iraqis have purchased two long-range radar systems, a sector operations control facility, and that will eventually route into an air operations center. I will tell you that the first radar they purchased is turning and it's producing returns and they are learning how to operate that radar and developing the construct on how they will integrate that.

So they're -- they're working to that, but as you say, they will not have fighter aircraft, and so there is a gap there in that response and defense piece.

Q: So -- sorry, a real quick follow-up. So there's no -- is there any formal agreements or contingencies in place that, you know, some Iranian jets come across the border, you know, U.S. jets stationed in Kuwait, provide some kind of deterrence or, you know, actual engagement, since the Iraqis don't have, you know, the fighter jets -- which are arguably, you know, the key to sovereignty in Iraqi airspace, aren't they?

GEN. HANDY: I'm sorry, what was that last part? You were garbled.

Q: Oh, I said -- I said, you know, fighter jets are kind of -- you know, you talk about these different pieces of maintaining airspace

sovereignty, but the jets are kind of the -- have the kinetic capability. Is there any kind of agreement in place or being worked on between the Iraqi and U.S. government that, you know, U.S. jets stationed in, you know, say, Kuwait would be there kind of as a quick reaction force, you know, should a neighboring country, you know, infiltrate Iraq's airspace?

GEN. HANDY: Right. No, the only agreement we have signed is the security agreement you're very familiar with, which expires on December 31st of this year. So we have no authorities nor any agreement to do anything of the like at this point.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Thank you, sir.

And Nick, you were next.

Q: Thanks for speaking with us today, General. I have a question that kind of follows on your last response. And I'm wondering, in your opinion, how long will it be until Iraq has enough pilots, radars, planes, air operations centers to effectively defend itself from outside attack?

GEN. HANDY: Well, I mean, what I think we can predict is, given the known production capability in the United States of the F-16s that Iraq has purchased and the pilots that are already training -- I mean they have already put 10 pilots into the United States in some form of training on the way to F-16 qualification. As I mentioned, the radars are being installed. One of them's actually operating.

So I think we can predict that -- there are some variables to when the fighters will be delivered and how quickly the pilot production -- I mean, the current projections are they'll start getting these fighters sometime in late 2014 and potentially early 2015. There will be -- given the current timeline, there will be F-16-qualified pilots that are finished with the program by then.

So it's -- but it's not a light switch; you know, all of a sudden they've got capability, or they don't have capability today, and tomorrow they do. I mean, they'll evolve into that. But they will -- they will have some form of capability with those first fighters that are arriving.

But I would really hesitate -- it would be presumptuous of me to predict, you know, where they would declare an initial operational capability or a full operational capability. That really has to be up to the Iraqis to say, hey, this is what we judge to be capable enough to say that.

As I said, they'll start getting fighters in that late 2014, early 2015 time frame with the current schedule. And then it'll continually evolve from there, continue to improve in capability.

Q: Sure. I was just really looking for -- I know it's not your place to say -- I was just looking for your opinion. I mean, Iraq has been attacked by air quite a number of times in the last few decades. So

I understand when they would finally come online and have some capability. But I'm talking about, you know, fully able to defend itself as a -- you know, as a sovereign nation.

GEN. HANDY: Right, and I'll tell you, my experience, both serving in my Air Force and then watching many other air -- fledgling air forces form their capacity is it's fraught with peril to offer an opinion about the defense capabilities of another nation three or four years down the road or more. So I'll pass.

Q: OK. Thank you.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: And Gail, you were next.

Q: OK, General. My question kind of follows along some of the others, but just kind of more -- I should say, Gail Harris with the Foreign Policy Association, sorry -- some of the other questions, but more big-picture, just from your perspective, what are some of the challenges, which I'm sure would be similar to any nation developing a -- you know, a new air force, navy and so forth? And I'm thinking about things like training, logistics, getting their own intelligence organizations up to speed to support the air force, recruiting, you know, personnel, those types of issues, if you can comment. And if not, I certainly understand.

GEN. HANDY: No, I think those are -- those are valid questions. And I think what we have seen historically with the Iraqi Air Force, and frankly, the whole -- all of the Iraqi security forces -- and it's not uncommon when you look at comparing them to others not just in the region, but all over the world -- is the logistics and infrastructure piece, I think, will continue to be a challenge, particularly with a nation that has struggled through many years of combat.

And if you think about the generation that has fought hard through this time and now are rebuilding this fledgling air force kind of from the ground up -- and so it's, quite frankly, much easier to buy systems than it is to establish a coherent logistics and infrastructure system. And so the Iraqis will have to choose how much of that do they do via contract mechanisms versus do it with their military personnel. And in some cases, like they are now, for example, with their T-6s, a very successful squadron that they are operating on their own, a training unit, do they start with contract and then gradually evolve, leading to Iraqi military maintenance? And so if I had to -- all those things that you talked about lining up, pick the thing that I think might be one of their larger challenges, I would say that.

I don't know about recruiting. I honestly will declare ignorance on that. I'm not sure if they see challenges. I will tell you that the recruits that I meet and talk to and work with, the young airmen, are incredibly motivated. They're talented. They are fired up about their country in the future. And so if they are having a problem recruiting, it doesn't show when I go talk to them and fly with them.

Q: Thank you, sir.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: And Sharon.

Q: Yeah, I was wondering if you could address the -- basically rotary-wing. Iraq had done purchases over the past few years, a mix of MI-17, I think they were called, counterterrorism helicopters, and basically the Russian MI-17s and also Bell 407s. Do you know -- what are the status of deliveries on those? And how are -- is that mix of Western and Russian equipment turning out, both in terms of sort of integration, and also on the operational readiness rates between those two?

GEN. HANDY: Well, I think, Sharon, you're going to stump me on the operational readiness rates of the two that -- the short answer is they do have MI-17 helicopters. They've got an improved version, which I think is the -- I believe is the M-171 version, but it's an MI-17 through -- and they also have Bell helicopters. They are, I think, investigating the potential of a logistics contract for the Bell helicopters that they are -- they are looking at. And they use the MI-17s for battlefield mobility, and they use them quite successfully.

I mean, we see those being employed all over the country as well as the Bells.

So I don't have any reliable info off the top of my head. That's something -- Stacy's (sp) taking notes -- that's something we'll take a note and see if we can get for you. But I'm not -- I don't have any operational readiness rates of the two. I do know that both those weapon systems are flying successfully.

Q: Got it. And so what is the status -- you said they're basically considering a logistics contract with Bell -- I mean, what are they weighing there, or what are their options?

GEN. HANDY: I'm not -- I'm going to send somebody running for that. Not being the expert on FMS right now, I'm not familiar with what the alternatives are to that. I just know that there have been discussions about a contract for that that they have been in with our international affairs folks. And again, I'll get you an update on that here by the end of our talk.

Q: Sure. Thank you.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: And we can go back around to Chuck.

Q: General, how many air bases remain under U.S. control versus Iraqi control right now? And can you speak to cargo-hauling capabilities of the Iraqi air force?

GEN. HANDY: Sure. The bases we're at, I believe we're at around 12. It's a fast-breaking, changing ball game. Back in 2008, as you know, we had 505 bases. We're at about a dozen now.

Q: How about air bases?

GEN. HANDY: And about -- and half of those are partnered.

How many air bases -- I'm counting. I'll tell you what, I'm going to go to the second question. I'm going to come up with that answer here in a second so I don't give you an invalid answer. We're at 12 overall bases. I'm going to get you the number of air bases.

As far as the cargo-hauling capability, Iraqis have a couple of ways, if you're referring to air mobility, that they haul cargo. They certainly have C-130 capacity. They've got a C-130 squadron and they are purchasing our newest version of the C-130, the C-130J. They currently have three C-130Es. And I believe they're purchasing six of the C-130Js, so the squadron will be nine total. They also have a cargo-hauling capacity with their helicopters. So both the army aviation command and the air force have that capability.

And I'll tell you, Chuck, I got a big note in front of me. Before we finish this, I'm going to tell you the exact number of air bases so I don't get that wrong.

Q: OK. So they're effectively using their cargo-hauling capability.

GEN. HANDY: Yes. I mean, they are effectively using that. I mean, I see the C-130s being widely employed. That squadron, I believe, was the first one to operate on its own without U.S. advisers and has been doing so for some time.

Q: All right. Thank you.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: And Maggie.

Q: Hi. General, I have heard that the number of trainers that will be left behind in Iraq are going to be at about 30. In your opinion, is that enough to continue the training that the Iraqi air force needs?

GEN. HANDY: Well, I'll go back to the question -- and I can't remember if that was Jeff who asked it -- about trainers on the ground. But I will say first of all that we're not leaving trainers in Iraq in the context of the type of -- (define the word "trainer" ?) that we use today. The military -- U.S. military that may be part of this Office of Security Cooperation that operates under U.S. Mission Iraq, again, are managing Foreign Military Sales cases. And so they're not doing the types of out-there, on-the-ground or in-aircraft training that we are doing now. Not anything like that. These folks are assisting the Iraqis in standing up capability and managing these cases working with contractors who are out as well doing that sort of thing.

So -- and the overall numbers of folks that could be in the Office of Security Cooperation, we're talking somewhere between 100 and 200 is what we predict. And I'm not going to give an exact number, because it's still being discussed and we're still talking to the Iraqis

about specifically which sites and which cases we'll have folks in the Office of Security Cooperation working with.

Q: OK. So -- and forgive me if I'm confusing this in my head -- the training's going to be in the hands of contractors from now on.

Is that what -- because that's what it sounded like to me that you just said.

GEN. HANDY: No, what I -- what I said, if you're -- if you're referring to the Office of Security Cooperation and the trainers that -- the individuals that are working under the auspices of the OSC-I, they will be servicing, administratively managing these Foreign Military Sales contracts. If you think about a radar is installed at a site, we've got potentially an Air Force person, an airmen who is potentially an expert on acquisition and fielding of a site. He will be managing that case. And he may have a handful of contractors that would go out there and help the Iraqis install that and make sure they know how to turn it on and operate it. But again, none of those people are doing the sorts of training that our Title 10 military forces are doing now out on the ground, hands-on training with Iraqi security forces. So really, trying to define that word in a different way; these folks are not trainers in that context.

Now, as the Iraqis choose to hire contractors on their own to do some other form of training, that -- I'm not aware of them doing that in a large way. But certainly they could do that, but that sort of thing would not be under what the U.S. government is doing.

Q: OK, thank you.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Michelle (sp), did you have a question this time around?

Q: Yes, I did, Glenn. Thank you, General, for joining us today and giving us this opportunity. Leading into what the previous inquiry was with respect to the training, the number of people that we're going to have from the State Department and the contractors there, will we -- will we be providing any assistance to them, or will they all be contracted out as far as the Air Force is concerned and the training to those for the State Department?

GEN. HANDY: We are likely to be providing assistance with that. There will be a larger number of contractors than there will military; it will be a small number, as I indicated. But there will likely be U.S. military personnel, because we do have experts in uniform that manage acquisition programs and manage Foreign Military Sales cases. So we are likely to have those sorts of managers and advisers military. And I keep saying that we are likely because the final conclusion of what all that looks like really is still pending, frankly, and it's still being discussed by -- between our two governments and finalized on if and where these individuals will be and in what numbers.

Q: OK, very good.

GEN. HANDY: And we do that in -- we do that to a large degree all over the world, as you -- as you might know. I think in most Arab League countries, there's some sort of a U.S. Office of Security Cooperation. So wherever you go, if you -- if you're -- the U.S. is participating in a Foreign Military Sales case with the country, you will nearly always find this sort of a military contractor mix out there servicing those cases. So it will be very similar to what you see elsewhere.

Q: Are they hoping to have this finalized -- or the State Department, should I say -- to have this in concrete -- I mean, in writing -- and have the agreements by the time everybody's supposed to be gone in 12/31?

GEN. HANDY: Yes, we would certainly hope so. I don't -- I'm not privy to the precise timelines that the embassy is working on with the Iraqi government. As you might imagine, that -- that's a -- that would be a U.S. embassy Baghdad question to ask. But certainly, yes, we would hope to have those agreements in place -- (inaudible, background noise).

Q: OK.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Thank you very much.

Sir, is that coming from your background? I just want to make sure everybody --

GEN. HANDY: I'm sorry, say that again?

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Is that -- is that background coming from your side? I'm just trying to make sure everybody has their phone on mute.

GEN. HANDY: No, it is not coming from our side.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: OK, please make sure your phone is on mute, everybody, if you're not asking a question, once again.

And Jeff, you are next.

Q: Yes, sir. Going back to the previous question about any kind of, you know, U.S. assistance in the air, you know, over Iraq as, you know, they build their capability, you know, you had said the only agreement we have signed is a security agreement. We have no authority nor any agreement to do anything of the like at this point. As far as you're aware, are there -- are there any, you know, ongoing talks or discussions about the U.S., you know, providing this kind of service?

GEN. HANDY: No, I am not aware of any such talks.

Q: OK.

GEN. HANDY: And Chuck, there are -- of the 12 bases, six of them are air bases. Sorry about the delay.

Q: Great. Thank you.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: And Nick.

Q: Yes, General, I was wondering if you can speak to how many airfields the embassy and the State Department will retain or retain access to?

GEN. HANDY: I -- you know, I can't speak to that because the embassy is still deliberating exactly what their plan will look like and what airfields they will need to operate from. They certainly will need some sort of access to their sites, whether that be rotary-wing or fixed-wing, but honestly, it is still pending. They are -- they are still looking at that pretty hard, so I don't want to speak for them, and I'm quite sure they haven't come to a conclusion yet on that. They're still looking at that.

Q: OK. Thank you.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Thank you very much.

And Gail.

Q: Yeah, General, first off, I want to thank you and your staff for your stupendous efforts over there in Iraq. I was wondering if you could give a snapshot of our forces that helped in the area, you know, percentage Navy, Marines, you know, that type of generality, if you have that -- those figures.

GEN. HANDY: I do. It's -- boy, it's changing really fast, though, Gail, the numbers, because we are certainly in that phase where we're -- many of our -- many of our forces are leaving the country every day.

We're sitting at about 30,000 total in Iraq and falling very quickly, as I say, because we're reposturing and redeploying. We are down to about 2,000 airmen -- Air Force personnel in Iraq, which is a much lower percentage than we used to have. We ran at about 10 (percent) to 12 percent airmen to overall numbers here for a while, for, actually, a few years. But just based upon the way we are posturing our forces now, we are down to a lower number just because we're closing a lot of these air bases where we had larger numbers of people.

The percentage of Navy and Marines -- I don't have that, but it is very small. There are very few sailors and Marines in the country now as a percent.

Q: Thank you. And the -- is there any truth to the rumor that the Navy pilots are better? (Laughter.)

GEN. HANDY: Well, Gail, better at what? (Laughter.)

Q: Thank you.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: And -- good question, Gail.

And Sharon, you're next. Sharon, you're still on the line?

Hmm, OK. Sir, do you have time for one more question, or --

GEN. HANDY: You bet. I sure do.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: I guess -- Chuck, you -- it goes back around to you, then, Chuck.

Q: Yeah, General, thank you.

Q: Hi.

Q: Is the United States still running air cover missions in Iraq? And how is that going to -- how do you orchestrate that with the withdrawal of U.S. troops? And I -- it's kind of -- it seems like it might be a complex dance to provide air cover while withdrawing troops.

GEN. HANDY: Chuck, that is very insightful. It's a great word. It's a great analogy, I think, because it is very complex, because our task -- as I indicated in my opening remarks, our tasks to protect our forces have not reduced. And quite the contrary, we are more active, and we have a larger requirement now in that area because in this reposture with -- as you might imagine, with many forces on the ground, force protection is our priority. It really is -- force protection, being good stewards of our taxpayer resources and safely getting our forces out of the country while we transition to the government of Iraq and our U.S. Mission Iraq partners.

And so what we have -- what we have done is over time -- and again, I indicated that we were a lower percentage of overall forces in Iraq than we used to be. And there is a reason for that. We began a reposture of forces to elsewhere in the region to be able to support the effort in earnest all the way until the end of New Dawn. And so we -- as you know, in Air Force at Central Command, we've got a large number of air forces around the region supporting -- well, Iraq and Afghanistan and other areas. And there's a number of forces that do that from a number of bases.

And so we not only have a presence in Iraq, but we also have a regional presence. And with the use of our incredible air refueling assets and our command and control assets that are able to reach out for many miles, we're able to continue to provide that level of support until the end of the operation.

Q: Thank you.

Q: Hey, could I -- sorry, this is Sharon. Could I slip in one question? I got kind of passed over (while I was fumbling with the phone?).

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: I was trying to -- I was calling for you, Sharon. Yeah, sure, you can ask -- you can go ahead and do one more question.

Q: Yeah, that was my fault. I was trying to unmute my phone.

Yeah, I was just -- going back to the air sovereignty question, so basically, it looks like Iraq will have about a two-year gap until it gets its F-16s. Have they asked for advice, or have you provided advice on how they deal in those interim two-year period -- or however long it is until they get the F-16s? I mean, what can they do in terms of maintaining their sovereignty, air sovereignty?

GEN. HANDY: Well, you're right. We talked about the response, the defense portion of that air sovereignty continuum. There is a gap between us leaving, completing our security agreement, and Iraqis getting capability. We've -- I have not personally been engaged in a lot of conversations with the Iraqis about how to close that gap. I mean, certainly there are a number of ways you can -- you can close that gap.

You can buy your own capability, buy your own aircraft, which they're doing. It's just going to take time. Or you can ask someone else to do it. Or you can -- or you can go without that capability and exercise those other elements of the -- of the air sovereignty continuum. In other words, there are many countries that have sovereign boundaries and sovereign air space without having F-16s or some kind of fighter aircraft. There are -- there are ways that you can respond, both diplomatically and economically. You could ask for assistance after the fact. And so there are -- there are, again, many ways to respond to that. And the short answer is, there will be a gap, and it will be up to the Iraqis on how they will deal with that gap.

Q: Thank you.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Thank you very much, sir.

With that, I'd like to thank everybody on the line for your questions and comments. And sir, I would like to ask you if you have a closing statement. You can go ahead with that now.

GEN. HANDY: I do. I do appreciate it, and thanks for your time. I mean, I hope this has been helpful to you and will be of use to your readers. It's of great interest to me for the American public to have an accurate and complete perspective of what their sons and daughters and husbands, wives, parents, friends, neighbors, are doing over here in Iraq in a very challenging time.

We do live in interesting times. Our troops and their families have suffered here during this quest and sacrificed for this opportunity that the Iraqis now have, for some way -- for some time. But no one

should believe this sacrifice was in vain. Our legacy here really is the extraordinary opportunity now for the people of Iraq.

But as we've discussed here, that -- with that opportunity comes extraordinary challenges. And as I think about the potential of this nation, squarely positioned in the middle of a very turbulent region, I can't help but reflect on what's going on in our country right now. If you think about it, tomorrow many will go to the polls in the United States to cast their vote in a variety of state and local level elections, and we're just one day inside of a year until our next U.S. presidential election. So as I ponder this, as I sit here in Baghdad and think about that in the U.S., I'm reminded of the significance of living in a free democracy where individual citizens are afforded the opportunity to go to the polls, cast their vote for a candidate of their choice, to influence what happens to them in the legislature through this choice. And I'm reminded also of the cost of both establishing and continuing a democracy -- a democratic, inclusive system of government, that Iraq has. It's not easy, but it's worth it.

And finally, just one more comment. On the eve of Veterans Day, where the nation formally recognizes the contributions of millions of past and present men and women in uniform, I do want to pass on my sincere appreciation for the conspicuously grateful American people.

I was speaking to my wife about this just last night, and I reflected on how often she's stopped and asked how things are going over here and thanked for her service, and they ask her to thank me. And as one of the hundreds -- one of the thousands of family members waiting at home, she appreciates that. And, you know, the folks she speaks to, they don't offer their opinion about whether or not our military ought to be engaged in country "X" or country "Y," they just thank her, and they ask her to thank me and all of our airmen, soldiers, sailors, Marines over here, and hope we make it home safely.

So I'm eternally appreciative of that attitude back home; isn't lost on our men and women serving here. It is what sustains them. Rest assured our airmen serving here will do everything in their power to ensure they get all of our troops home safely.

And so I'm really proud to be able to have shared some of my thoughts with you of what your Air Force is doing in Iraq. And thank you very much.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Sir, thank you very much. And once again, thank you to everybody on the line for your time and for your participation.

Today's program will be available on dodlive.mil, where you'll be able to access a story based on today's call along with source documents such as the audio file and a print transcript.

Again, thank you to everybody on the line. This concludes today's event. Feel free to disconnect at this time.

END.